Chronic Wasting Disease Report

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If you haven't heard by now that Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was found in a Texas White-tailed deer (WTD) captive breeder herd this summer, you must have been detailed to the space station for the past few months. As I write this, we still only have one infected (index) herd identified, but that is all it takes to shake things up in the deer world. We had previously found wild mule deer infected in far west Texas, but they are not related to this situation.

Although the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) permits more than 1,200 deer breeders, it is still a relatively young industry and thus a very close-knit community. As folks work on improving their genetic stock, they engage in lots of dealing and trading with each other.

The result of that is that the index herd did business with more than 10 percent of the industry in the past five years, including buying from 30 possible source herds and selling to 126 breeder or release sites. That makes for quite an imposing task from an epidemiological standpoint. Texas is unique among states that allow captive deer breeding as it also allows "liberation" of deer into larger pasture facilities for breeding or hunting.

Although there is much already known about CWD, there are still many things we don't know. As the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) veterinarians sat down with our TPWD partners to consider the next step, there were many false assumptions and misunderstandings to avoid in completing an effective science-based disease plan.

Although TAHC immediately put hold orders on all exposed and source herds, TPWD stopped all breeder movement temporarily so everyone could catch their breath, and that was the right thing to do. The stoppage put everyone under tight deadlines to get a plan together so deer could be safely released before hunting season. The two agencies sat down and worked more closely together than ever before to deal with the index herd situation and the resumption of breeder movements and liberation movements. The issues were complex and volatile as we tried to balance the protection of health for free-ranging deer, the health of the deer breeder industry and the business continuity for a lucrative emerging industry. Keep in mind that cervid stakeholders are split as to how good of an idea captive deer breeding actually is, so there was a lot of debate on every idea.

The fact that there is no validated live animal test and that the disease (prion) can affect the environment as well as animals weighed heavily on all decisions to be made. Nonetheless, there were some basic tenets of CWD science to help officials, including the fact that the disease does not pose a public health concern, is not transmitted in semen and the longest possible incubation period is five years.

I couldn't be prouder of the timely decisions derived related to resumption of industry movements with enhanced surveillance standards put into place. The goal was to ensure that any deer herds wanting to release or move animals had significant and recent surveillance testing from their deer. Basically, the more mortality testing a herd did recently, the lesser the hurdle they had to meet with the new standards. The more than 180 breeders enrolled in the TAHC status who test 100% of all mortalities were given a huge head start, and approximately 60 of those with more than five years of testing were released from statewide movement restrictions immediately. Enrollment in the TAHC 100% testing program paid off! (Minimum TPWD movement requirements are only for 20% of mortalities).

For the other 1,200 herds, they had to meet various minimum standards of breeder deer testing, and for the first time, hunter surveillance on liberation sites was incorporated into CWD surveillance. A comprehensive statewide testing program must include all segments of the deer industry, including captive deer, liberated deer behind high fences and free-ranging deer. Through the efforts of TPWD and TAHC, there will be more effective surveillance systems in place for this fall's liberation calendar, and TPWD has indicated they will expand hunter surveillance as well.

Veterinarians across Texas played a major role in helping with the enhanced surveillance standards put in place by assisting with the sampling of obex and lymph nodes, which are the samples to take post mortem. The Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory (TVMDL) is also to be commended for outstanding customer service in assuring quick turnaround times for the thousands of tests coming in this fall.

I don't know how many more infected herds (if any) will be found, and I don't believe our wild deer in Texas are affected right now, but we must create better surveillance systems regardless. The plan that the industry stakeholders, TPWD and TAHC agreed on to enhance surveillance streams and to get deer moving this fall in a safe fashion is just the beginning of a dynamic process. Next spring, we will revisit all policies related to testing, release protocols and approaches to minimize disease risk after we have more testing information.

I do believe there will be some role for live animal testing down the road in Texas with tonsils, rectal lymphoid tissues and other tests under research. Although they may have to be run more than once, by the time fall 2016 rolls around, we may have drastically altered the state movement plan than was created for 2015.

Detection of disease in other herds, decisions about when or how live tests can be applied to mitigate risk and changing political winds can all move the needle in either direction for this event. In the meantime, I couldn't be prouder to be part of the veterinary community who managed the disease investigation, developed surveillance standards, created herd plans for source, trace out and liberation sites and, most importantly, ensured veterinary science guided all decisions. TV